

Effects of Vouchers On The American Education System

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Presented to the Public Administration Faculty
at the University of Michigan-Flint
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Master of Public Administration

3-28-2002

First Reader

Second Reader

Abstract

The following research is a compilation of recent debates and studies that have been published on the issue of school vouchers. Several questions are weighed and examined. The legal issues regarding vouchers are presented. Should vouchers be considered constitutional? The effects vouchers have on public schools are stated by both critics and supporters. Do school vouchers help or hinder public school progress by creating competition? The students that received vouchers are also examined. Do school vouchers increase student achievement and equality? Finally, how does the American public feel about vouchers? Do they support vouchers? If not, what do they really want?

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Introduction

Why Vouchers?

As discontent with the public schools in America has steadily been on the rise, new ideas were exchanged between scholars, teachers, and parents. Charter schools have become popular options for some parents. These schools promise ingenuity and escape from the typical public school. Some receive a basic fund allowance just as a public school so that the parents do not have to pay. To some parents, charters schools initially were a very attractive alternative to the traditional public education. As parents soon found out, charter schools face many of the same problems with which the public schools have had to contend.

Private schools are still the top option for many parents. However, the cost to attend private schools makes them inaccessible for many parents desiring a better education for their child. Many students in need of a better education have few real options. The parents cannot escape their poor district because of limited income. They cannot afford to send their child to a private school. Thus, the child must stay at the failing public school.

Parents of children in poor districts have long been calling for reform as they

witness their children's schools crumbling and state test scores dwindling. This is illustrated in Metcalf's article "Free Market Policies and Public Education" (Phi Delta Kappan, Sept. 1999). The disgruntled parents set forth several concerns to show their children are not getting the education to which they are entitled. This is especially true in urban areas where the average income is much less than their suburban counterparts.

Those parents that wish for their children to attend a private school as a solution, but cannot afford to send them, have a new option: school vouchers. Vouchers are different from charter schools in two significant ways. Unlike most school choice programs, voucher programs "allow parents to use the voucher to select among both public and private schools" (Metcalf 66).

There is some deception taking place, however, when it is said that these publicly funded vouchers allow parents to "pay for their children to attend a public or private school of their choice" (McCarthy 372). The truth is that virtually "all currently operating voucher programs include schools with religious affiliations" (Metcalf 66).

Voucher programs, whether privately or publicly funded, exist in many forms. Privately funded vouchers are paid for "by private individuals, organizations, or foundations" (Kolbert 5). Privately funded voucher programs exist in over a dozen cities across the United States. Many more are in development across the nation.

Publicly funded vouchers are "those financed with state education dollars" (Kolbert 5). Three major publicly funded voucher programs currently exist. They are running in cities in Wisconsin and Ohio, and exist most recently in the entire state of Florida. Milwaukee is the city of interest in Wisconsin and Cleveland is focused on in

Ohio for their existing voucher programs. Florida's entire state is using a new voucher program. These three public studies will be explored throughout this study. Overall, only a handful of studies are available that have either existed long enough or intensive enough to provide any telling data. These studies are typically small, dealing with only districts or single cities. In most cases, very little real evidence is available. With that in mind, the supporters and critics of these programs fight for their causes. As they do, the research continues and the debate rages on. The following research chronicles this debate and gives sufficient overview on the issue of vouchers.

The Key Questions

School vouchers are the latest school choice option. With this option comes several questions that must be further explored. The first of these questions is whether or not vouchers are legal based on what our Constitution says dealing with the separation of church and state. Can public money be used to support religious schools? Legal battles and court cases are explored to examine this issue.

Secondly, do vouchers promote public school improvement? If students have the choice to use the voucher at any school, including religious schools, will the public schools have no choice but to compete and thus improve? Or will vouchers only siphon off much-needed money and talent from the hurting public schools by reducing the public school enrollment? With the threat of competition over their heads, will the public schools be forced to improve and will real choice exist? Several studies are identified and explored to see whether or not voucher programs induce the public schools to improve.

A third key question is whether vouchers promote increases in student achievement on standardized tests. How do students compare in their school achievement when you examine test scores from their previous school to their choice school? Do the scores show a statistically significant increase? Student scores in states where programs have been studied are used to answer these questions.

Another pertinent question is whether or not voucher programs increase the educational opportunities of students. Do vouchers offer new educational opportunities by giving parents the funding to send their children to the private school of their choice?

Could vouchers provide disadvantaged children with opportunities they might not afford otherwise? Or do vouchers allow the choice schools to select the best and already successful students, leaving the at-risk ones behind? Even worse, do these programs merely offer to pay for students who are already in private religious schools with almost no effect on poor students who cannot afford to attend? Ultimately, the actual amount that is available does not cover the entire cost of tuition. If parents of children in the failing schools are unable to escape the failing school district, what makes us believe that they can afford to pay for private school tuition, even with voucher assistance?

A final question to be addressed is whether vouchers increase parental involvement and satisfaction with their choice school compared to their previous public school. Why did parents choose the voucher? Do parents become more involved with their student's school of choice? Do parents become more satisfied with their new school? Surveys of parents are used to determine whether or not the vouchers had a significant effect in these areas.

The issue of school vouchers is quite possibly the most divisive educational topic currently facing our country. Some young voucher programs exist with some success in Milwaukee and Cleveland. Florida's governor recently signed the first state-wide voucher law into effect. It has been greeted with many legal challenges.

Other proposals in Oregon, Washington, California, Colorado, and Michigan have met resounding defeats. Groups are either strongly for or strongly against this reform controversial type of reform. Over the following pages, the assertions most relevant to the voucher issue have been spelled out.

Are Vouchers Constitutional?

When considering vouchers being used as supplements to enter a private school, critics, such as Kemerer and King in their 1995 *Phi Delta Kappan* article “Are School Vouchers Constitutional?”, note that approximately 85 percent of private schools have a religious affiliation. When the state gives parents public money in the form of vouchers that can be used at a religious school, does the participation of these religious schools violate the First Amendment’s establishment clause? The clause specifically prohibits any government action in regard to establishing religion. To answer the authors’ question, one must examine the court cases regarding the balance of religious freedom and educational choice.

How can these two concepts, religious freedom and educational choice, coexist without offending the establishment clause of our Constitution? Over the past 75 years, the courts have faced the issue of separation of church and state. The history is important in understanding how the court created a three-prong test in *Lemon v. Kurtzman* to determine whether the law in conflict would be constitutional or not.

The first relevant case goes as far back as 1925 with *Pierce v. Society of Sisters*. The statute that was argued was “all children ages eight to sixteen must attend public schools.” This case in Oregon concluded that the compulsory education law requiring all children to attend public schools violated the due process clause of our Constitution. In 1947, the case *Everson v. Board of Education* concluded that public money could be used to reimburse parents of students riding public transportation to religious schools.

The court's rationale was that using tax funds to pay bus fares for parochial students did not violate the establishment clause of our Constitution.

Do vouchers pass the test that the Supreme Court has created to determine whether a law is in violation of the establishment clause? The cornerstone of the Supreme Court's involvement in the separation of church and state concept came with the decision put forth in *Lemon v. Kurtzman* in 1971. This case concluded that any government action affecting religion had to have (1) a secular legislative purpose; (2) a primary effect that neither advances nor inhibits religion; and (3) no excessive entanglement between church and state. If a program, such as the current voucher systems, violates any of the three requirements, it must fail.

Although the voucher issue seems to be one of current rhetoric, the court invalidated a tuition-reimbursement program for low-income children to attend Catholic schools in *Committees for Public Inspection v. Nyquist* in 1973. It was in violation of the Lemon Test because it only allowed the children to be reimbursed if they attended the secular school. The court said that if the program would have been for all schools and not just the Catholic schools, it would have been constitutional.

Can vouchers avoid a Constitutional violation? One of the issues regarding constitutionality of school vouchers is that of giving public money to the private schools which are predominantly religious institutions. Giving public money to the religious schools equals a strict violation of the Establishment Clause. How do people get around the Constitution?

A case that examines this issue is *Mueller v. Allan*, which ruled that tax deductions for school expenses for both private and public schools in Minnesota was

legal. It is important to note that the court's rationale in *Mueller* was that as long as the practice is neutral it is constitutional.

In *Whitters v. Washington Department of Services*, the court allowed funding for services to a blind student at a Christian college. The idea in *Whitters* was that if the money was given directly to the person and the person chooses what school attend, this would not represent an unconstitutional advancement of religion.

In Milwaukee, Wisconsin, a voucher plan was introduced in 1989 to specifically "provide state vouchers for disadvantaged students to attend nonsectarian schools" (Metcalf 372). Since there were no First Amendment questions, the Supreme Court of Wisconsin upheld the legislation.

Problems first arose, however, when the legislature, in 1996, permitted students using vouchers to attend sectarian schools. After a back and forth battle among the Wisconsin courts, the Wisconsin Supreme Court found no violation of the Establishment Clause. The court stated that the program was constitutional since "it provided aid to both secular and sectarian institutions based on neutral criteria and only as a result of private choices" (Metcalf 372). The United States Supreme Court allowed this ruling to stand when it chose not to hear the case on appeal.

In Ohio, several cases will be used to examine the question of the constitutionality of vouchers. In 1995, a pilot program that permitted state funded vouchers to be used at private schools or public schools in neighboring districts has met many legal challenges. This pilot "Cleveland Scholarship Program" was legally challenged throughout the 1990's. The lower courts found the program not to be in violation of the

Constitution. The Appellate Court, in 1997, ruled the program unconstitutional. The Ohio Supreme Court, in *Simmons-Harris v. Goff*, ruled the program to be unconstitutional on procedural issues pertaining to equality of distribution of the vouchers. The program violated a provision in the Ohio constitution that required general laws have statewide application. After the procedural discrepancies were remedied, the program was allowed to continue in revised form.

Constitutional disputes over vouchers continued in December, 2000, with the Appeals Court in Ohio declaring the Cleveland Scholarship Program unconstitutional on the grounds that government funding of private tuition crosses the line of separation of church and state by promoting religious education. A large majority of the schools involved in the Ohio program are affiliated with some form of religion.

Sianjina's article is used to further outline how states are considering voucher proposals to help respond to public discontent with the present education system. He explains how the states will all experience the same Constitutional battles.

Some courts could quite possibly uphold voucher programs based on how the scholarship money is distributed. Presumably, the program would have a better chance of being upheld in court if the child's scholarship goes "to parents, if parents or students have a wide choice of schools, and if no preference is given to religious schools" (Sianjina 111). On the other hand, voucher programs that send money straight to the school "rather than to parents are particularly susceptible to attack on constitutional grounds" (Sianjina 111). Strictly based on the wording of the program, constitutionality of programs may vary from state to state. In general, three causes of inconsistency have been identified. They are "differences in the wording of state constitutional provisions,

variations in the design of school voucher programs, and differences in district judicial perspectives” (Sianjina 111).

Supporters say that vouchers can be justified in a fairly simple way. As long as voucher money goes to the parent, “the parent, not the state decide(s) where to send their children to school, and the funds simply follow the child” (McCarthy 375). Parental decisions should not be misinterpreted as government decisions and “these independent decisions of parents break the link between the government and the religious entity, thus eliminating any establishment clause infraction” (McCarthy 375).

In 1997, the Supreme Court stated that assistance from the government would not likely to be unconstitutional if the financial aid was “allocated on the basis of neutral , secular criteria that neither favor nor disfavor religion, and is made available to both religious and secular beneficiaries on a nondiscriminatory basis” (McCarthy 375). Supporters of vouchers claim that this statement can be applied to their cause.

Menendez’s article explains the failure of proposed voucher programs when they have been placed before the electorate. The programs were voted down 21 out of 22 times in the past twenty years. In those elections, “nearly two out of three voters have rejected public support for private and religious schools.” It also explains considerations being made in some states to amend their constitutions to allow state aid to religious schools.

Elam’s article examines why Florida’s voucher plan is unconstitutional. He states that the program violates three parts of the Florida Constitution. The Florida constitution states that “no revenue of the state...shall ever be taken from the public treasury directly

or indirectly in aid of any church, sect, or religious denomination or in aid of any sectarian institution.” Elam also says the program violates the establishment clause of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

In conclusion, the legal history behind the voucher issue is quite extensive over the short period of time that vouchers have existed. The Court recently turned down the reviewing of voucher cases from Wisconsin and Maine. It has left the rulings up to the individual states. The United States Supreme Court has yet to rule on voucher programs.

In September of 2001, the Supreme Court chose to review the school voucher issue once and for all. Both sides of the Cleveland voucher issue argued in court in February of 2002. The verdict in this case will have a large impact in disputes across the country. In the summer of 2002, the Court will decide whether the Constitution allows public dollars to pay religious school tuition. If the Court rules vouchers unconstitutional, “the school voucher movement will be severely curtailed” (McCarthy 372). However, if the court rules in favor of vouchers, states will be encouraged “to experiment with various types of voucher systems” (McCarthy 372). Many supporters expect a decision similar to what the Wisconsin Supreme Court declared back in the 1990’s. A decision is expected by next summer. In the meantime, both sides will continue fighting for their cause. Despite the legal horizon for voucher programs is still clouded, “more states are considering such proposals as a way to respond to perceived shortcomings of the current public education plan” (Sianjina 112). Although speculation runs rampant on both sides, there have been some clues that the Court may be “willing to allow more state aid to flow to sectarian schools than in the past” (McCarthy 372).

Do Vouchers Promote Public School Improvement?

Reform talks are endless in education. Critics of the public school system are quick to point out its shortcomings. In general, they claim that public schools are worse off than they have been in quite some time. One statistic that they look at that “represents” this alleged failure is the supposed decline of the SAT scores. However, public school supporters counter by saying the decline “can be attributed to the fact that a much larger percentage of high school graduates now take the exam” (Molnar 80). In addition, when including a reduction in funding for many school districts, “the fact that the SAT scores have not declined more than they should have should be taken as a monument to the superior performance of the nation’s public schools” (Prasch 509). In spite of the counter argument, many still believe that national scores must improve.

What is one way to raise the low scores? With national and state test scores showing no significant sign of improvement, the latest claim in several articles and studies point toward vouchers as a potential solution to testing woes. In examining the question, articles in *The Educational Forum*, *Phi Delta Kappan*, *The Economist*, and *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* have been used to compile relevant studies that have been completed or are still ongoing. In general, it seems that the “only point on which advocates and critics of school vouchers agree is that if such systems are implemented on a broad scale, they will drastically change public education in our nation” (McCarthy 371).

Supporters of voucher programs say there are minimally two positives that will

come from their implementation. First, it increases competition and pushes schools to improve their educational product. Secondly, it makes the schools become more aware of parental desires and, in doing so, “more attractive to education consumers” (Holloway 81).

Although it is likely that vouchers will generate competition by turning American education into a free market type atmosphere, it is “less clear whether this competition will provide a satisfactory education” (Prasch 510). One possible indication of what happens when competition is brought forth can be seen in the Standard and Poor’s Report.

In Michigan the recent Standard and Poor’s School Evaluation of all school districts in the state has opened the eyes of many parents, administrators, legislators, and teachers. The report has become one factor in parent’s making an informed decision on where or where not to send their children. This report has begun to present public education in form of a market. Where can a parent get the best education for their child? Many schools are now facing this reality. Charter and private schools are already options for parents if they don’t prefer their local district. The Standard and Poor’s Report has become a tool for parents to decide. It also has become a measuring stick for schools to see where they are in terms of their peers. Each district “struggles for patronage and its very survival” (Prasch 511). What would happen if vouchers are added to the mix? Would it be too much for the public schools to handle? Or would it be yet another incentive for the public schools to improve and strive to survive?

Will the public schools be able to compete with the religious schools to keep the best students? Will vouchers pull the best students away from the public schools? In

1996 the debate continued. An article by Bhagavan in *The Educational Forum* titled “The Discourse of School Choice in the United States” was published. It examined effects of unlimited and limited vouchers on the private and public schools. The article argued that the government would not be able to control the admissions policies of all the private schools. This would lead to the schools setting whatever standards they felt necessary to receive only the most talented and well-to-do students. The low income and highly minority students would be left back at their poor schools that offer minimal educational opportunities. Critics contend that vouchers would only increase educational segregation rather than decrease it.

Critics further this by saying that the best schools will continue to be the best and the bad schools will only get worse. In general, under a market system, the best schools will be admitting the students whose parents already have the ingredients for success. Typically, those attracted to the best schools “are those children whose parents have the resources- in time, knowledge, and efficient social networks” (Prasch 511). Likewise, the market system leaves the perceived lesser schools with the “children whose parents are either indifferent to education or are unable to play the game effectively” (Prasch 511). According to Prasch’s observations, free market education will lead to more segmentation of the population along both class and racial lines.

The supporters argued that, since many private schools are already near capacity, the public school enrollment would not be significantly affected. Supporters also noted that Wisconsin recognized public school concerns and double-funded each student by giving money to the urban and suburban schools.

Rayton R. Sianjina, in his article titled “Parental Choice, School Vouchers, and

Separation of Church and State: Legal Implications”, which was published in the winter 1999 edition of *The Educational Forum*, explained that supporters of vouchers believe that by giving parents choice, public schools improve in every aspect. This theory held that competition would increase student academic capabilities and parents would become more involved in their children’s schooling. If the school chooses not to compete, it is making the choice to fall out of existence (Sianjina 108). Supporters consider this the survival of the best schools.

By breaking the monopoly that the public schools have over education, a voucher program “would lower the cost of schooling for a given amount of pupil achievement and improve school quality for a given cost” (Sianjina 109). Critics, however, state that vouchers simply undermine the public schools and take away from already scarce resources. Instead of using the word **competition** when dealing with the future of our youth, critics suggest focusing more on the word **cooperation** to solve America’s public school deficiencies.

Other research has been done to suggest that when schools face choice and competition, they will improve. This reasoning suggests that the public schools would improve “because (a) efficient schools will be chosen by parents, and (b) schools faced with the threat of losing students (and funding) will improve or go out of business” (Goldhaber 21). When based on market theory, competition would cause all schools to rise up. This rising tide “would lift all boats so that even students left behind would benefit from competition” (Goldhaber 21).

The Prasch article, “What Is Wrong With Education Vouchers”,

criticizes the many existing programs and seeks to prove that the existing voucher idea is no cure all solution. Voucher programs, according to the article, are a harbor for less educational equality, less social mobility, and further separation of race and class. Prash asserts that the market approach to education is not the route to go. Education cannot be stripped down to a simple good.

Do vouchers really address the problems that the public schools face? Prash states that vouchers do nothing to address the countless existing problems of public schools. There is no money set aside to fix leaky roofs, contaminated buildings, outdated equipment, provide adequate resources, or deal with any number of ills that plague our public schools. Without those problems being addressed, how can public schools have a chance to improve when the scales are already tipped against them? It appears to many scholars that vouchers would only worsen the current conditions. As with many of the current programs, Florida's Opportunity Scholarship Program would give vouchers equal to the funding per-child in that district. Florida's program is different from the others in that in 1999 it became "the first state to adopt a statewide voucher plan that allows public funds to flow to private schools" (McCarty 372). Whether state program or city program, critics fear the same results for public schools. The school that loses the student also loses the state funding for that student. This clearly does not benefit the public school. It only further tips the scale.

Do vouchers improve public schools by increasing the level of competition? The impact of the program described in "The Milwaukee Voucher Experiment", by John Witte, on the public schools in Milwaukee is difficult to determine. First of all,

do voucher programs create the competition to push the public schools to improve ?

The primary problem in evaluating the impact on Milwaukee's public schools is that the voucher program was too small to show any conclusive effects on the public schools.

The number of public school students that left for the choice program was just over 1% of the public school enrollment. Since the number was so small, the competition that was anticipated was not likely to occur.

As for the effects of the 1991 program on the initial seven private schools in the choice program, the results were a little more dramatic. One of the seven schools went bankrupt early in the onset of the program. Two of the surviving schools were also on the verge of bankruptcy until the choice program played a partial role in their resurgence. All six of the schools survived, improved their facilities, expanded programs, and improved turnover rates and diversity among their staff. Teachers, on average, remained at the private schools for longer periods, reflecting increased salaries and benefits directly related to the voucher program. They were also dealing with the best students.

Other articles with information on school voucher effects include Wood's "Responding to the consumer: Parental Choice and School Effectiveness" and Hoxby's "Evidence on Private School Vouchers: Effects on School and Students." These both explore the ramifications of choice programs on the public and private schools. The concept of competition is considered but results appear to be inconclusive.

Although data is slim, generalizations can be made. The theory supporting vouchers is that competition will make the public schools better. Market competition, as suggested earlier by Goldhaber, forces the public schools to become efficient and effective machines. In reality voucher programs only make public school reform more

difficult. You start with a “failing” school. A voucher program will allow a limited number of students to flee to nearby parochial, private, or charter schools. You leave the previous public school with less resources. In addition, typically the best students are selected first in a voucher program. The public school now has less resources to deal with a higher percentage of students with difficulties. How can we expect the public school to improve its scores with less and less to go by? Is this a level playing field?

Perhaps being left out of the equation is the power of public opinion. When the public was surveyed in a 1999 Phi Delta Kappan study, the results were telling. The public had two choices- either improving and strengthening public schools or providing vouchers to leave the failing schools. “Respondents were in favor of strengthening the existing public schools by an overwhelming margin of 70% to 28%” (Elam 86).

Vouchers are definitely an option available to many parents in numerous states.

Vouchers may further destroy the public schools- clearly contrary to what the public has stated. If the number of families offered vouchers is substantial and they “take advantage of alternatives to public education, the effect on public schooling will be negative” (Metcalf 74).

Competition is healthy in education if the competition takes place on a level playing field. All participants, public and private must abide by the same rules. Schools accepting vouchers need to allow access to all students, including special education and at-risk. All state mandated programs for public schools should also apply to voucher recipients. These programs include such things as special education, tenure, free/reduced lunches, and the same testing requirements the public schools must face.

Do Vouchers Increase Student Achievement?

If students aren't performing at an acceptable level, what are the options? If test scores are low, what can parents do? They call for reform. Vouchers are at the top of the list for educational reform. Do they work? Do they help students improve their achievement?

One of the major existing studies used is from *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* in the Winter of 1998. The article, "The Milwaukee Voucher Experiment", by John F. Witte, surveys the results of the first five years of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program. This program was the first in the United States to allow students to attend private schools with public vouchers. Its initial goal was to provide an experimental opportunity for some poor children to attend private schools. Initially, religious schools were not allowed into the program. In June of 1995, the program was amended to include the parochial schools. Students with vouchers attended parochial schools for the first time in the fall of 1998. The achievement statistics are based on the information **prior** to the admittance of the parochial schools.

An analysis of the differences in the 1991-1994 Iowa Test of Basic Skills between the public schools and choice schools was conducted. When examining the differences in achievement scores in the public schools and the choice schools, there is no substantial difference. There is one major positive note for the voucher supporters. Normally, inner-city student average scores decline relative to national norms in higher

grades. The scores of the inner-city students enrolled in the voucher program did not decline substantially as the students entered the higher grades. By sustaining their scores, though still lower than national average, the voucher advocates claim victory.

In summary, Witte found “no substantial difference in achievement over the life of the program between choice and (assigned) students” (Witte 241). Research done on the program in the past few years has found “no consistent differences between choice and (assigned) students in value-added achievement scores using any of the modeling approaches” (Witte 241).

As for the Cleveland Scholarship Program, noted in several articles and studies, achievement did not increase in the first year of the choice program in 1996. By the end of the second year, some positive scores were achieved. Specifically, the studies note statistically significant improvement on some sections of the California Achievement Test. Improvements that were significant were in: reading, math total, and math concepts. The area of language decreased but the change was statistically insignificant.

The existing studies suggest that academic achievement may increase to a small level. Generally, however, the programs are still too young to concretely declare a positive difference in achievement between public and private test scores. There is no firm basis for the claim that provided educational choice will improve student learning.

Dan Goldhaber, in his article “School Choice: Do We Know Enough?”, states that “we do not know enough about how different voucher designs would impact educational and social outcomes in various contexts to form a conclusion pro or con.” The possible results range from an increase in overall test scores, to no significant change, to having a

negative effect on those students who can't afford to move into the private schools.

Goldhaber doesn't claim that increased competition in schools will increase the achievement, he only leaves the possibility open based on the current lack of research.

Teachers and their unions have argued against voucher programs. They suggest alternative reforms to assist increases in disadvantaged children's achievement. These ideas range from smaller class sizes to preschool programs. These types of programs would work for all students, not just the select few who move to another school.

In the Froese-Germain study conducted in 1998, competition resulting from voucher programs does not necessarily increase student achievement. The study concluded that when schools have to compete for students, they seem to become more conservative and take less risks. They also tend to keep the traditional curriculum rather than becoming innovative. The same goes for types of instruction and assessment. The schools appear to take steps backward rather than experiment with new techniques.

As a whole, existing voucher programs lack evidence when it comes to predicting student achievement. When analyzing results of current studies, including Milwaukee and Cleveland, "available evidence does not indicate clearly that voucher programs do or do not improve students' academic achievement"(Metcalf 73). There is not consistent difference between achievement of voucher students when compared to their public school counterparts "when prior achievement and demographic variables are controlled" (Metcalf 73). It must also be noted that the studies taking place are still only a few years old and "it is reasonable to wonder whether additional years will yield similar results" (Metcalf 73).

Articles also pertaining to student achievement include Driscoll's "Choice, Achievement, and School Community", Plank's "Effects of Choice in Education", and Witte's "Private Versus Public School Achievement: Should the findings affect the choice debate?". These articles give further background and information to the Milwaukee and Cleveland studies along with theory as to why or why not choice will improve student achievement.

Do Vouchers Increase Equality Of Educational Opportunity?

Citizens of the United States value many things. They value freedom. They value equality. They value education. Can these three ideas be combined into one? Is it possible to give the freedom to choose what school you send your child and by doing so solve the equality in education dilemma?

Students across the country learn in an educational system that contains vast inequalities from school district to school district. Teachers, parents, and politicians have wrestled with the issue: how can we provide equal educational opportunity for all? Possibly the most significant concept of the voucher programs that exist today is the idea that they are catalysts for educational equality. Supporters of vouchers believe that vouchers provide that voucher programs “give parents with limited incomes the same opportunity to select a school available to wealthier parents” (Holloway 81).

Supporters believe that vouchers may be the solution to the equality among students issue. Currently, middle income families can choose a good school by moving into that district and residing there. Wealthier families can also send their children to private institutions which are frequently seen as the elite schools of opportunity. Contrary, the poorest families often have no choice at all as to where they live, “often being forced to live in neighborhoods near the most dangerous and least effective schools” (Metcalf 66). With this in mind, voucher supporters suggest inequality would

diminish by offering the vouchers to the poor families, thus giving them means to escape their ineffective district. Is it likely that the poor families will value the opportunity?

The Educational Forum article in the summer of 1996 titled “The Discourse of School Choice in the United States” by Manu Bhagavan identified key issues and general problems with most of the preliminary findings behind the many existing state voucher programs that claim to promote greater equality among schools. One factor noted was that the limited availability of transportation would most likely affect low income and minority students. The number of students that would be admitted is seriously hampered by space limitations in the private schools. Many of the most affordable schools are affiliated with a particular religion, thus again raising constitutional issues. Another key concern raised is that of price gouging. Parochial and private schools could theoretically raise tuition to match the amount of the voucher.

Three separate studies of the Milwaukee voucher experiment appear to conclude that its administration has brought forth more educational opportunities for minority and low-income groups. Although it has been noted that participation does not necessarily mean higher scores, the program has enhanced choice for low-income, predominantly African American and Hispanic families.

In the Cleveland Studies, over a two-year period in the voucher program, the percentage of students receiving vouchers was 87% non-white and 86% non-white. Over half lived only with a mother. Over 85% were eligible for the free and reduced lunch program. Over half were female. The voucher students were also achieving on average at slightly higher levels than their public school peers.

The voucher students may indeed achieve slightly better than their former classmates. They are also typically better off in other areas too. The students using vouchers are slightly better off in a socioeconomic way. Parental care and support can also be evidenced simply by the fact that the parent wanted the child in a perceived better environment. “Pervasive forces and factors in the society have more influence on academic achievement than does school “quality” as measured by standardized tests” (Elam 82). Removing your student from a failing school to a better perceived school does not change the socioeconomic condition. It only changes the perspective.

Other possibilities include the idea that finds charter schools “which are more likely to be formed in low-income areas, also attract students from those areas who have more educated parents” (Goldhaber 21). Also, if the parents have more schooling options, there is less chance they would flee to another city. This would appear to encourage integration by possibly discouraging “or reverse white or middle class flight out of cities” (Goldhaber 22). As of yet, however, no study has been put forth to examine the merits of this argument.

Florida’s voucher plan, known as the Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP), “could qualify as many as 150,000 of the state’s 2.3 million K-12 public school students for vouchers” (Elam 82). Florida’s OSP, similar to what President George Bush Jr. had proposed to solve the nation’s problem of failing schools, allows for vouchers to be passed out to students of any of the 170 schools in Florida that are failing based on state testing. These vouchers would go for private and parochial education. In its simplest sense, the Florida program would create an out for students that were previously trapped in “failing schools”. The problem, as it is with many voucher programs, is that “there are

far too few places in Florida's 1,262 nonpublic schools for an influx of 150,000 students- or even for a more realistic 50,000" (Elam 82).

As for the existing non public schools, many-especially those with religious backgrounds- "are unwilling to accept the restrictions and obligations imposed by the new law on voucher receiving schools" (Elam 82). Equally interesting is the fact that the students most in need of a voucher are not requesting one. In July of 1999, a report was released that stated most of the children at a qualifying district in Florida that were requesting vouchers "were the brightest in their classes" (Elam 85). Once again, the lowest achievers stay the lowest.

When investigating voucher programs that were piloted in Europe, "the primary negative effect of school choice was its natural tendency to increase the educational gap between the privileged and underprivileged (Sianjina 109). Another study back in 1998 by Froese-Germain found, despite claims of educational equality, vouchers may increase the separation of students by race, social class, and cultural background.

The paradox? The best students of the failing school "escape" leaving the failing school with even lower scores than they had to begin with! One principal in a failing district was concerned that the loss of the top students "would make it doubly difficult for (the school) to meet the state standards in the coming school year" (Elam 85).

It is clear that voucher programs can be created to provide additional educational choice to the families of children who may be at-risk. However, only the top students in the public schools will have the opportunity to move into the already full private schools.

Most will have to continue to deal with the ongoing public school deficiencies. These statements are further affirmed in articles by Gerwitz, titled “Markets, choice and equity in education”, and Areen, titled “Education Vouchers: A proposal for diversity and choice.”

Both authors argue that voucher programs have the potential to decrease segregation in our nation’s schools. Vouchers have the potential to increase educational opportunity, especially for minority and low-income children. The problem arises when you have limited space in the private school. The private schools will naturally select the top students. The student’s most in need of a change are destined to stay within their insufficient public school. With this in mind, advocacy groups for blacks, such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and The National Urban League are typically opposed to vouchers. They see the reality that only a few of the many will be “saved” from failing public schools.

If a voucher program can be developed that would target only families of low-income, some critics may lessen their voice. Voucher programs need to have strict limitations that only the most needy receive the financial assistance. Another possibility could be to base it on the federal system for distributing financial aid. Direct assistance could be given to those most demonstrating it. The amount and terms of the assistance could be negotiable based on need. The question with voucher programs then changes from one of whether they are effective to a more reasonable question of what the “nature of the boundaries within which choice should be established” (Metcalf 74). Even so, the question of space still looms. Only so many can be admitted to the elite schools. Then again, we may still be simply skirting around the larger issue.

The Americans United for Separation of Church and State foresee several problems (Kolbert 14) with the voucher system:

1. Private schools charge high tuition.
2. Voucher plans provide limited funding.
3. Few private schools are located in inner cities or other economically depressed areas where the vouchers would be of most use.
4. Few private schools are likely to admit those children with special needs or disabilities.
5. No voucher plan would benefit more than a few of the poor children most in need.

The *St. Petersburg Times* summarized the argument of voucher critics in a 1998 editorial, asking whether it was best to “expend our money and time salvaging the public school system, or do we siphon off its resources for the handful of students who will find seats in private schools and spend our time fighting it in court?”

How does a large scale voucher program effect society as a whole? What is the “long-term effect on society as the system gathers the ‘losers’ in the school competition and clusters them in the ‘losing’ schools?” (Sianjina 110) Do vouchers increase educational opportunity? Quite possibly they do for a few of the students. For the many however, “there is compelling evidence that vouchers will result in less equality of opportunity, less social mobility, and the further exacerbation of social stratification along the lines of race and class” (Prasch 514).

What creates the best educational opportunity for all students? Many public schools have been losing funds for years. If the public schools begin to lose students, the school district’s “fixed costs remain the same, and thus loss of these dollars is significant.” (Kolbert 13). Many schools are in need of repairs. How do you fix up the buildings that most of our American children attend when the schools are losing much needed funds?

In addition, how do schools improve education for *all* of American children when

“vouchers divert money and support from financially strapped schools, hampering there ability to improve education for *all*” (Kolbert 13).

Our schools are now expected to cure societal problems through drug education and social skills classes. Shouldn't there be an effort to provide the adequate funding for the schools to get off life support before pulling the plug. Finally, “state certification, tenure, and promotion rules should be reexamined to ensure that teachers have, and keep, an incentive to provide a good education” (Prasch 514).

Do Vouchers Increase Parental Involvement And Satisfaction In Their Children's Schools?

The final question deals with the involvement and attitudes of the parents in the new setting of a private school. Clearly, parents were dissatisfied with their previous school. Does that result in ultimate satisfaction at their student's new school? Generally, the answer appears to be yes.

According to survey results of choice student's parents from "The Milwaukee Voucher Experiment" by John Witte in *Educational Evaluation and Analysis*, parents played a large part in the early success of the program. The choice parents increased their involvement when their children were in the private schools. Parental involvement increased in the areas of school contacts and organizations. The survey indicated that parental involvement at home did not increase. It must also be noted that some of the private schools required parents to sign contracts that would ensure their involvement in their child's education.

How did the choice parents in Milwaukee feel about their new school? The choice parents were very satisfied with their new school overall. Using a Likert scale, parents of choice students were asked eight questions in a "school satisfaction scale". When asked what they liked the best of the choice school, the parents chose "educational environment" and "discipline". When asked what they liked the least of the public schools, they answered the same.

The parents of students were asked to rate their public schools on a scale of 4 to 1. The parents of public school children rated their schools at an average of 2.8. The parents of choice students were asked to grade their former public schools. The average

in this case was a 2.4. Then the parents of the choice students were asked to grade their choice school. The average was 3.0.

In the Cleveland study, as reviewed by Patrick J. McEwan in the summer, 2000, *Review of Educational Research* titled “The Potential Impact of Large-Scale Voucher Programs” summarizes many of the same results. Also useful is the previously cited Metcalf article, “Free Market Policies and Public Education.” In these articles, most Cleveland parents of students who received vouchers were surveyed by telephone about their satisfaction with their children’s school. They responded with their reasons for taking the voucher. In order of the importance perceived by the parents, they first took the voucher with the hope of improved academic quality at the private/religious school. Secondly, the parents surveyed felt that their child would be safer at a private/religious school. The school location was listed as the third reason for taking the voucher. Others took the voucher because the school promoted a particular religion. Also, parents that received the vouchers were much more satisfied with their school than parents who did not receive a voucher. This included being much more satisfied in the areas of academic quality, safety, discipline, attention to the child, class size, facility, and the teaching of moral values.

In another separate study, “parents were dissatisfied with their children’s former public schools and chose to enroll their children in private schools for improved educational quality and greater safety” (Metcalf 73). Parents are typically happy with the chance to use a voucher. This study also concluded that, unlike other studies, “religion or religious education was not a primary consideration” (Metcalf 73).

In general, it appears that parents are generally dissatisfied with their children's former school and are pleased with their choice school. Interestingly, religion or religious education is not one of the top priorities.

Do American voters support voucher proposals?

What is the single most valuable factor that exists when examining the numerous possibilities for voucher programs throughout the United States? Who has the biggest voice? Do we leave the decision making to the politicians with their own quick fixes? Do we rely on teacher unions with their own agendas? Or do we look to the citizens themselves?

In one poll done in 1993, over 95% of adults in the U.S. think that parents need greater choice regarding their children's education (Carlos 1993). However, in a poll taken two years later, only 50% of public school parents said yes to supporting redirection of education money to provide vouchers for parents to use at private schools (Matthews 1995). In 1998, a study was completed that revealed 40% of parents with children in public school would, with help from a voucher, send their children to private schools (Rose 1998).

Existing programs also show that "only a very small portion of eligible families apply for available tuition vouchers" (Metcalf 73). Looking at two of the major publicly funded voucher studies done in Milwaukee, Wisconsin and in Cleveland, Ohio, results show eligible parents are avoiding available vouchers like the plague. In Milwaukee, "fewer than 7% of eligible families apply for the voucher program" (Metcalf 73). Cleveland's voucher program resulted in a somewhat smaller percentage of parents applying for the vouchers and "has decreased in the three years of the program" (Metcalf

73). This counters the critics who claimed that public schools will be losing many students to the voucher program. On the other hand, the low participation could also be a sign of satisfaction with the local public schools. Or it could indicate “indifference, apathy, or lack of information” (Metcalf 73). So what about the public in general? How do they feel about the voucher issue? Putting all the talk and rhetoric aside, it all comes down to literally casting a vote for or against voucher programs. Which side does the public chose?

What have the people said about vouchers when it comes time to vote on them? When individual states create voucher proposals and then placing them in front of the public, these “voucher initiatives have been defeated when subjected to a vote of the citizenry” (McCarthy 372). When the voucher movement first began in the 1970’s under the guidance of Milton Friedman and others, Michigan was one of the first states to get vote on the ballot. Seeing dollar signs, Michigan Catholic schools “supported a state initiative voucher vote in 1978, but it failed” (Pipho 261). Vouchers did not disappear.

Over twenty years later, voters once again turned down a voucher proposal in Michigan. Michigan’s voters turned down the voucher proposal, known as Proposal 1, by a margin of more than 2 to 1. It would have given parents in failing districts (those with a graduation rate of less than two thirds of the students) scholarships worth half of that school’s per pupil amount. This money could have been used at the private school of their choice.

Although a strong advocate of charter schools, Republican Governor John Engler did not support the proposal. Governor Engler could apparently smell the looming defeat

and did not want to be any where near the voucher proposal if it fell.

Teacher's unions were major opponents to the proposal. Some Baptist pastors throughout Michigan also spoke out against vouchers. These people were collectively known as All Kids First!

Supporting the proposal were numerous individuals and groups. The DeVos family, known for their Amway corporation, were supporters of the proposal through the disastrous vote. The single largest donor supporting the voucher proposal was John Walton, of WalMart fame. They were also backed with support from the Catholic Bishops, pastors, and numerous high ranking public officials such as Senator John McCain, a Republican from Arizona. These supporters, known as Kids First! Yes!, say they are considering trying a similar voucher proposal in the upcoming years.

The question for these voucher supporters may be, "Why try it again?" Since the 1960's, voters have spoken out against vouchers where it matters the most: the polls. Not including the recent vote in Michigan, "the issue of vouchers has been placed before the electorate 22 times since 1966, and the voters have rejected it 21 times" through September of 1999 (Menendez 76). As with the Michigan case, voters generally rejected the proposals by a ratio of 2 to 1. Over a dozen states have tried various voucher proposals and all failed but one in South Dakota.

The past ten years have been particularly telling through the voice of the voter. In 1990, four states, including Oregon, soundly rejected separate voucher proposals (Menendez 77). In 1993, Californians affirmed what history has taught us. They turned down their voucher proposal with 70% of the people voting against it (Menendez 77). In 1996, "Washington State decisively trounced a voucher initiative placed on the ballot by

multimillionaire Ron Taber” (Menendez 78). The year 1998 brought along more defeat for voucher supporters. Voters in Colorado were faced with “Amendment 17”. This amendment to their state constitution was to establish an income tax credit for “parents or legal guardians of children enrolled in public, non-public schools, and non-public home-based educational programs” (Pipho 261). Opponents of the amendment insisted that it was not a “measure to improve education but rather a measure to reward only those parents who can afford to send their children to private schools” (Pipho 262). Milton Friedman was said to have donated \$1,000 in support of the proposal. The people of the State of Colorado, however, did not send their support. They said no to their state’s form of vouchers by a count of 41% for and 59% against.

With all the punches voters threw at the voucher issues at the polls over the last 25 years, it would seem logical that the voucher issue would disappear. The debate rages on. Proposals will be tinkered with. They will be retooled. The proposals will continue to resurface in states in years to come. Then voters will continue to do what they historically have done. Just say no.

What do the American People Want?

In the words of Albert Menendez, “it makes little sense for state and national legislators to continue to press for programs that the American people do not want” (Menendez 80). So if the American people don’t want voucher programs, what do they want? When the voucher program in Michigan was rejected, members from both sides called for further discussion on how to improve an imperfect educational system of which several districts in the state are struggling to graduate even half of their students (Capeloto). Almost ninety percent of all students in the public schools attend public schools. It should seem logical to focus the attention on these schools and how to repair them rather than give up on them or provide an escape route.

Although critics are quick to recognize the imperfections in America’s public schools, “the nation’s public school system functions well overall” (Kolbert 13). When speaking of student achievement in the United States, “American students are among the best educated in the world” (Kolbert 13). Most of those students attend public schools.

Conclusions

It appears in the early research that vouchers, if targeted toward low-income, minority, or disadvantaged students, can fulfill a need in our country for equal opportunity in education. Unfortunately, students most in need live in impoverished areas where parents are unable to afford to send their child to private school, even with the help of a voucher. If vouchers are handed out to everyone, rather than based on need, the program does not succeed in its goal. Most private schools have tight enrollments. How much room do they have for low-income students from “failing” schools? It appears the ones who may benefit the most are those who least need it.

As long as those public money vouchers are not used for the advancement of religion, they should be found constitutional. If the voucher is being used for placement at a parochial school, many legal battles will follow.

In the few studies that have been done in the 1990's, public schools have not been adversely affected because of the small percentage of students moving to the private schools. Coinciding with that, the “competition” spoke of by voucher advocates has not occurred. Public schools will continue to face the same problems they have been facing.

Statewide voucher proposals are still a threat to voucher critics. Much more data will need to be collected and analyzed before the voucher bandwagon is full. Our leaders must carefully examine the consequences of statewide voucher programs.

No matter which side of the voucher argument is chosen, the future holds that research will help what is now a very political debate. This research will identify the

misgivings of vouchers and provide that “steps might be taken to mitigate the potential downside of choice systems” (Goldhaber 22). The bottom line? The existing evidence does not provide strength to either side of the debate. Before any radical change occurs, thought and patience must be used to provide the best educational opportunities for our youth.

These programs are at the forefront of public education in America. “Educational choice will continue to be the most contentious issue in U.S. education for the foreseeable future” (Metcalf 75). Schooling alternatives will continue to sprout daily. All options of implementation must be examined for their constitutionality, educational equality among students, and student achievement. Vouchers are just one of many options available now, but they are one step in reforming our current American education system. They are one step in forever changing the traditional role public education has played in the United States for many generations.

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